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ABSTRACT

A study investigated students' perceptions about their interactions while using a Literacy Play Center geared toward social studies with a "time machine" theme. Subjects, 19 fifth-grade students in a suburban elementary school in central New Jersey, were interviewed about their experience and video taped while interacting in the play center. Results indicated that students reported feeling very happy and excited while in the Literacy Play Center apparently because of the social interaction that took place. Findings suggest that students perceived the social studies activities and their involvement in the Literacy Play Center as much more interesting than when content area subject matter was delivered via traditional text and lecture method. Contains 27 references and 2 tables of data; 3 appendixes illustrate details of the play center and present student and teacher questionnaires. (SC)

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Fifth Graders' Perceptions Of Their Interactions While Using Literacy Play Centers

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Background

Educators have been interested in the effects of student motivation on learning for decades (Dillon & al, 1992; Weiner,1990). It has been found that there is a strong relationship between motivation and achievement (Gambrell, 1996). It also appears that students' motivation may decline as they advance in grades and they begin to value reading less (Eccles, Wigfield, & Midgley, 1993; Gambrell, 1996; Wigfield, 1997). The diminished motivation in older students is even more apparent when dealing with the at-risk population (Dillon & al, 1996; McKenna, 1995).

Therefore, it is of paramount importance that teachers determine effective methods for increasing students' interest and motivation for reading and writing. We need to create tasks that have personal value for the students and foster the development of intrinsic motivation for literacy activities (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996; Guthrie, 1996; Oldfather, 1993; Turner, 1995).

Physical environment is an important component when providing engaging, early literacy experiences (Morrow, 1989,1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Literacy Play Centers have increased young children's voluntary use of literacy activities and materials (Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Vukelich, 1991). When using Literacy Play Centers, children learn about literacy because it is integrated into an authentic context that is a familiar component of their environment (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Roskos, 1995; Walker, Allen & Glines, 1997).

Although Literacy Play Centers have been utilized effectively with young children to promote interest in literacy and to increase print awareness (Campbell & Foster, 1993; Neuman & Roskos, 1991, 1992), their use with older students has not been explored. To fulfill one of the requirements for a graduate course in literacy, our students have been designing and constructing Literacy Play Centers in grades two through five classrooms for the past two years. The data that we have collected thus far through surveys and conversations with classroom teachers has suggested that these middle elementary students have enjoyed using the centers in their classrooms and have been actively engaged in meaningful literacy activities while "playing" in the various centers.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions about their interactions while using a Literacy Play Center.

Methodology

Fifth grade students from one class in a suburban elementary school (grades three through six) in central New Jersey were the subjects for our study. There were nineteen Caucasian students in the class, ten girls and nine boys.

Graduate pre-service students enrolled in a literacy course collaborated with the elementary students and classroom teachers to decide what type of Literacy Play Center should be constructed in the fifth grade classroom. Choice was limited to the theme that was currently being studied in social studies. The center would be used as a supplemental activity to the class' social studies program, which consisted of a traditional social studies textbook.

The classroom teacher, who has taught elementary grades for twelve years, had no previous knowledge about the concept of using a Literacy Play Center to foster engagement in literacy activities.

It was decided to create a Time Machine, which focused on explorers. Possible props and materials to include in the center were also discussed. The graduate students were instructed to create an engaging, low-risk environment where the fifth graders could learn more about early explorers. After the graduate students constructed the Literacy Play Center, they met with the teacher and students to introduce the center and explain the props, activities, and materials (Appendix A). The fifth grade students named the center CZ's Time Warp.

The Literacy Play Center was utilized in the classroom for seven weeks. The teacher provided forty minutes, five times per week for groups of four or five students to interact in the center. Generally, every student was able to work in the Literacy Play Center twenty minutes, twice per week. The methods employed in the study were surveys, interviews, analysis of artifacts from the centers, video tapes, and pictures. The students were asked to write about their

experiences in the Literacy Play Center. We utilized this information to design a questionnaire that was administered to the students at the conclusion of the study (Appendix B). The questionnaire contained a five point rating scale as well as two open-ended questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the experience. The mean and range of scores for each of the questions were analyzed. The open-ended questions were coded.

Interviews were also conducted. Each student was individually presented with the information from his/her questionnaire. The students were asked to elaborate on the survey results to confirm or negate the information gleaned from the questionnaire. In addition, several questions were posed (Table I).

We video taped the students while interacting in the the play center three times during the seven week period. Photographs were also taken of the students. Observers visited the classroom weekly and took field notes during each visit. Notes included information about materials used as well as dialogue between the students that were in the Literacy Play Center. We used the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the observational data. Using our initial research questions, we searched the data for emerging patterns. We continued this analysis throughout the study, comparing and contrasting new data with the existing categories.

In addition, we collected and analyzed artifacts from the center to further determine what kinds of literacy activities the students were engaged in during the time spent in the Literacy Play Center. We compared this information with the patterns that emerged from the observations and video taping.

The classroom teacher also completed a questionnaire about her perceptions regarding the Literacy Play Center (Appendix C). She was interviewed regarding her thoughts on why she felt that her students would benefit from having a Literacy Play Center in her classroom (Table 2).

Results

The responses given by the students during the interviews and written questionnaires were similar. Patterns that emerged centered

around the physical environment, social interaction, and the types of activities that they completed. These categories were also evident during analysis of field notes, video tapes, and photographs. In addition, the field notes and video tapes revealed a high level of student engagement when they were working in the Literacy Play Center.

Environment

The students frequently indicated that the environment was comfortable and cozy. They liked the physical boundaries (walls and net ceiling) of the center, the lapboards, and the freedom to sit on pillows while they worked.

"It feels comfortable because it's enclosed."

"You just grab your assignment and sit back and relax."

"It is comfortable because we have pillows. It feels protective."

"It's nicer in there. It looks nicer, more comfortable, because of the pillows."

Social interaction

The students spoke about how much fun it was to participate in the center and get the opportunity to be with other students. They talked about how happy and excited they were when they working in the Literacy Play Center. They assisted each other with activities, discussed information, and shared the props.

"I feel happy and glad and happy to work with the other kids. I feel sad to leave the center."

"All the stuff in the center makes it fun."

"Good, because it's not only comfortable. I have friends in there."

Type of Activities

The majority of the students indicated that they liked the Trip Box the best. This was surprising because The Trip Box was comprised of many paper and pencil tasks, some of which were commercially

prepared worksheets that students might typically be assigned for seatwork or homework. Further, at the beginning of the data collection, the classroom teacher assigned two of the trips. It initially appeared that the students completed the trips because of the assignment given by the teacher, but they continued to be motivated to work on them after they were given more freedom to choose their own activities. However, they seemed to especially focus on "trips" that involved some aspect of art such as creating their own coat of arms and using reference books to label parts of a ship.

"They're (trips) fun. I loved to make my own underwater monster."

"The trips are fun to do and interesting."

"The trips because they're fun and there's competition. If there's a problem, you can look around the center and use the books."

The students also mentioned the journals as an activity that they liked. Careful inspection of the journals, though, revealed that most of the students did not write in them very often. Only a few pretended to be explorers writing about their adventures. It appears, though, that the students did not have extended periods of time to complete any sustained writing. Therefore, although the students liked the journals, they did not have the time to use them for their reflections.

Students also spoke about the availability of the computer and the reference books.

"I feel happy because I'm learning more things like where Christopher Columbus sailed to and ended."

" Great, I have time to do what I want like using the computer, reading the books, and using the gadgets."

Students were asked to compare the center to other social studies activities that they have had in their classroom. They indicated that they thought social studies was more interesting in the Literacy Play Center than when they read in the traditional text and discussed the material with the teacher.

"I like working in here. It's better than doing regular social studies."

"It doesn't feel like I'm really doing social studies in there."

"It's better because it's much more fun than reading in the boring textbook. You can write in journals and look up a website on the computer."

"The teacher just talks and gives worksheets. In the center, you can take a book, go at your own pace, and instead of raising your hand, you can think things through in your head."

Engagement

The students were actively engaged while in the center. This was apparent during all observations and analysis of the video tapes. They worked independently, in pairs, and in groups. There was a high level of on-task behavior noted. In addition, the students were very quiet, even when they worked cooperatively in small groups.

Analysis of the teacher interview and questionnaire indicated that she was positive about the experience of having a Literacy Play Center used in her classroom. Her main reason for being involved was to find more motivating writing and social studies' activities as well as to allow her students to become more involved in their own learning. The teacher felt that the students liked the "props" and materials. Since she indicated that she will build another Literacy Play Center for use with these students, it appears that she feels that her students benefited from this experience.

Limitations of the study:

This study was limited to one fifth grade classroom and one type of Literacy Play Center. Lack of time in the center was another constraint. The groups of students were only able to be in the Literacy Play Center for approximately fifteen to twenty minutes at one time. This greatly limited the opportunities for any sustained reading or writing as well as dramatic play activities (Christie, Johnsen, & Peckover, 1988). The classroom teacher did not receive any prior training regarding the concept of a Literacy Play Center, and as a result limited student choice when the center was first introduced.

Conclusions:

This study investigated fifth grade students' perceptions about their experiences while working in the "Time Machine" Literacy Play Center. The physical environment of the center, with its external boundaries, clearly defined space, and comfortable design seemed to have a most favorable impact on the students. This finding is consistent with previous investigations regarding space organization in early childhood classrooms (Roskos, 1995) and has implications for the design of intermediate grade rooms.

In addition, the students reported feeling very happy and excited while in the Literacy Play Center. The positive feelings appeared to be a result of the social interaction that took place. As Gambrell (1996) has indicated, students who are engaged tend to be socially interactive as well as motivated, knowledgeable and strategic. The comfortable, inviting physical environment also positively affected the students' feelings.

Further, the students liked the various activities, especially the paper and pencil worksheet type tasks. The students were highly engaged the entire time they spent in the Literacy Play Center and during all activities.

Finally, the students perceived the social studies activities and their involvement in the Literacy Play Center as much more interesting than when the content area subject was delivered via the traditional text and lecture method. In addition to the perceived interest level, students may have found the hands-on and varied activities as well as the multi-leveled materials to be more conducive to learning. Generally, the reading level of a content textbook is too difficult for many students to read and loaded with condensed factual information (Holmes & Ammon, 1985; Stewart, 1994).

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Table 1

Name: **Date:**

Teacher: **LPC:**

Literacy Play Center Interview

1. What activities have you done in the Literacy Play Center?
   trip box activities
   wrote in journals
   worked on the computer (internet sites)
   read books

2. How do you feel when you're reading in the Literacy Play Center? Explain...
   comfortable, enclosed
   really good, good, excited
   get to work with friends

3. How do you feel when you're writing in the Literacy Play Center? Explain...
   really good, good, excited
   comfortable, cozy

4. How does the Literacy Play Center compare to other things that you have done in social studies?
   more fun
   more interesting; doesn't seem like learning

5. What have you worked on the most in the Literacy Play Center? Why?
   Trip Box Activities

6. How do you feel when you're in the Literacy Play Center?
   happy, great, good
   comfortable, cozy
   friends are in there

7. What do you like the most about school? the least?
   most: reading, Literacy Play Center
   least: math, language arts/spelling
8. If we built another Literacy Play Center in your class, would you like to help make it?
   Yes (100%)

   How could you help?
   give ideas
   make activities; bring in stuff

Please share some other information with us.
fun
need more time in center

Table 2
Teacher Interview

1. Why did you want to have a Literacy Play Center in your classroom?
   would do anything to get the students to have a desire to write

2. Why did you want to be involved in this project with Monmouth University?
   always looking for something new

   always looking to learn about something different

   always trying to motivate students; a lot of outside influences contribute to lack of motivation

3. Why did you think that your students would benefit from a Literacy Play Center?
   social studies is boring, especially for girls; wanted to enrich the curriculum

4. Is there anything about the students' behavior that made you think that a Literacy Play Center would make a positive addition to your classroom?
   thought it might keep them on task more

   thought it would get them out of seats more

   would give them more independence and allow them to be more accountable for their own learning

Comments:
motivated teacher to build another center in class

gave her ideas; Students really liked the hands-on props.

Appendix A
Time Machine Contents

books
maps and posters
vocabulary board
signs
Trip Box (contained reading/writing activities)
blank books journal writing
stamp and stamp pads
timeline
computer
internet sites
globes
games
puzzles
travel brochures
diorama
compass
protractor kit
goggles
folders
crayons, pencils, dry erase markers
stickers
lapboards, pillows
bulletin board
front walls with netting for ceiling

Appendix B
Student Literacy Play Center Questionnaire (n=19)

Name:_____

Date: _____

Teacher:_____

For each sentence, circle the picture that best matches how you feel about the time you spent in the Literacy Play Center that was built in your classroom by the Monmouth University graduate students.

1. How do you feel about the Literacy Play Center that was built in your classroom by the Monmouth University students?
   first dog (happiest), 18; second happiest dog, 1 (mean, 4.94)

2. How do you feel about the kinds of reading materials that are in the Literacy Play Center?
   first dog (happiest), 11; second happiest dog, 7; middle dog, 1 (mean, 4.53)

3. How do you feel about the kinds of writing materials that are in the Literacy Play Center?
   first dog (happiest), 11; second happiest dog, 8; (mean, 4.6)

4. How did you feel when you read the information that is in the Literacy Play Center?
first dog (happiest), 9; second happiest dog, 8; middle dog, 2 (mean, 4.36)

5. How did you feel when you wrote about the information that you found in the Literacy Play Center?
first dog (happiest), 9; second happiest dog, 9; middle dog, 1 (mean, 4.42)

6. How would you feel about having another Literacy Play Center built in your classroom?
first dog (happiest), 17; least happiest dog, 2; (mean, 4.57)

7. How do you feel about reading and writing?
first dog (happiest), 9; second happiest dog, 7; middle dog, 3 (mean, 4.31)

8. What do you like best about the Literacy Play Center?
Trip Box
Journals
other activities

9. Is there anything that you would like changed in your Literacy Play Center?
nothing; fine the way it is

What changes would you like?
more time in center

10. What other kinds of Literacy Play Centers would you like to have built in your classroom?
science, space, weather, oceans
health
sports

11. Did you ever have a Literacy Play Center built in another class? What kind of center was it? What grade were you in?
No

Other Comments:

It is very cool.
I like it; I love it.
The Literacy Play Center is great.

Appendix C

Classroom Teacher Questionnaire

Name:_____

Date: _____

For each sentence, circle the number that best matches how you feel about the Monmouth University Literacy Play Center that was constructed in your classroom. (Teacher's responses are underlined.)

1 2 3 4 5

not at all somewhat pretty much a lot very much

1. I feel positively about agreeing to have a Literacy Play Center constructed in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

2. This experience with a Literacy Play Center enhanced my understanding about the benefits of immersing students in print in an authentic environment.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I enjoyed using the Literacy Play Center with my students.

1 2 3 4 5

4. I feel that my students gained valuable reading and writing experiences while using the Literacy Play Center.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I feel that my students enjoyed using the Literacy Play Center.

1 2 3 4 5

6. My students have used the Literacy Play Center on a regular basis.

1 2 3 4 5

7. My students frequently requested to be able to use the Literacy Play Center.

1 2 3 4 5

8. The Monmouth University graduate students seemed to increase their knowledge of Literacy Play Centers from designing and constructing one in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I enjoyed getting to actively participate in the planning and development of the Literacy Play Center.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I feel that my current or future classroom environment will be positively affected by my participation in the Literacy Play Center project.

1 2 3 4 5

11. In the future, I plan to continue to use other Literacy Play Centers in my classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

12. I plan to share the new information that I have learned about Literacy Play Centers with my colleagues.

1 2 3 4 5

13. I would recommend that other teachers use Literacy Play Centers in their classrooms.

1 2 3 4 **5**

14. I feel that my students' motivation for reading and writing increased during the time the Literacy Play Center was used in my classroom.

1 2 3 **4** 5

15. My students have become more interested in reading texts since the Literacy Play Center was constructed in my classroom.

1 2 **3** 4 5

16. My students have become more interested in writing about the content area they studied during the time the the Literacy Play Center was used in my class.

1 2 3 **4** 5

17. Please comment on the effectiveness of using Literacy Play Centers to enhance students' engagement and motivation for reading and writing.

motivation comes from props and attractiveness

no drastic change in willingness to read

motivated to write more creatively

18. Please indicate and then comment about what you think was the most beneficial part of the Literacy Center Project.

motivated because it was new and different

alternate way of learning social studies curriculum

students felt independent and in charge of their own learning

19. Please comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the project as well as to make suggestions for other semesters.
strengths: organization

teacher provided materials

clear, concise directions to students about use

attractive, positive reinforcement included

Additional comments:
plan to use the walls again for a completely different play center

Romeo 1997